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SUBJECT: UKRAINE: THE HOLODOMOR AND THE POLITICS OF
REMEMBRANCE: THE LEGACY OF STALIN'S 1932-33 FAMINE

Classified By: Ambassador for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. In the aftermath of moving commemorations November 25 of the 73rd anniversary of the holodomor ("Great Famine"), Stalin's man-made famine 1932-33 that led to the death of an estimated 5-10 million Ukrainians in Ukraine and the Russian Kuban region, the Rada passed in a single reading November 28 a bill submitted by President Yushchenko recognizing the holodomor as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people. The law adds momentum behind Yushchenko's efforts to use the holodomor to forge a strong sense of Ukrainian national identity and consciousness. A public opinion poll in early November showed that 65 percent of Ukrainians supported the "holodomor as genocide" interpretation, although other earlier polls showed significant regional differences. Passage came after hours of heated political debate over the endorsement of "genocide" and whether/how to include references to non-Ukrainians.

¶2. (C) Comment: Politically significant was the decision of the Socialist Party, led by Rada Speaker Moroz, to break ranks for the first time with anti-crisis coalition partners Regions and the Communists in voting with Tymoshenko Bloc (BYuT) and Our Ukraine (OU) MPs to secure passage of the bill. With the Communists out in front against the bill, both Yushchenko and Moroz took advantage of uncharacteristic uncertainty on the part of Yanukovych and Regions on how to handle the issue politically to seize the moral high ground and show national leadership. Presidential Secretariat deputy Head Vasyunyk told Ambassador Nov. 29 that many Regions MPs who lost relatives in the holodomor were angry that Regions' leaders had enforced party discipline against voting in support of the measure. End Summary and Comment.

Remembering a National Tragedy for the Ukrainian people

¶3. (U) The 73rd anniversary of Stalin's man-made famine, known in Ukrainian as the Holodomor (Holod-hunger, mor - the root of verbs connected to death, torture, suffering), that killed an estimated 5-10 million Ukrainians in the winter of 1932-1933, was observed in ceremonies throughout the country at 1600 on November 25. President Yushchenko led a solemn procession from St. Sofia's Square to the Holodomor Monument on St. Michael's Square about a half kilometer away; thousands of votive candles were at both locations, burning throughout the night. Religious officials, along with members of the Rada, the diplomatic corps including Ambassador, and the Cabinet of Ministers, were in attendance.

¶4. (U) Upon arrival at the memorial Yushchenko, his wife, and Rada Speaker Oleksandr Moroz led the laying of wreaths and lighting of candles at the base of Memorial during the nationally televised ceremony; PM Yanukovych was notably absent. A representative of each oblast then placed a candle at the base of the Memorial, emphasizing that the entire country had suffered from the lasting effects of the famine,

which was centered in what is now eastern and central Ukraine. A new holodomor monument was dedicated in a separate ceremony in Kharkiv; Kharkiv oblast alone lost two million in 1932-33, a third of its population.

¶ 5. (U) In an impassioned ten-minute nationally televised speech, Yushchenko, whose family hails from Sumy province, noted that his grandfather died together with his family in the Holodomor that, at its height, claimed 25,000 victims a day. Yushchenko stated: "Those who deny the famine today hate Ukraine deeply ... What they deny is not history -- they deny Ukrainian statehood." He then "demanded" that the Rada recognize the Holodomor as genocide.

Holodomor as genocide: Socialists join BYuT, OU

¶ 6. (SBU) In the run-up to the November 25 commemoration, Yushchenko had submitted a bill recognizing the Holodomor as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian nation and prohibiting public denial of the famine. Political maneuvering prevented the bill's consideration prior to the commemoration, but it dominated proceedings when the Rada resumed November 28, supported by Rada Speaker Moroz. The key drama concerned the position of PM Yanukovych's Party of Regions, since it was a given that the Communists would oppose the bill. Regions first tabled a competing bill defining the holodomor as a crime by a totalitarian regime against humanity" and the "Ukrainian people's national tragedy" but not genocide. They then advocated adopting Yushchenko's bill as a declaration rather than a law, and finally proposed genocide be defined as a crime by Stalin's regime against Ukrainian and other Soviet peoples.

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¶ 7. (SBU) A Moroz-brokered compromise changed "Ukrainian nation" to "Ukrainian people" (narod), a reference to the constitution's inclusive non-ethnic based definition of the Ukrainian people/narod as citizens of Ukraine of all nationalities. However, the basic definition of the holodomor as genocide remained. The compromise also dropped the proposed prohibition against holodomor denial, and Moroz ensured passage of the bill in a single reading, an unusual but allowable parliamentary maneuver. Regions nevertheless abstained, with the exception of two MPs -- Taras Chornovil and Anna Herman -- who broke party ranks to vote in favor of the resolution, citing family members who had died in central Ukraine during the holodomor. They joined with the Socialists, BYuT, and OU MPs present to secure a 233 vote majority.

¶ 8. (C) Presidential Deputy Chief of Staff Ivan Vasyunyk, Yushchenko's floor manager for the bill, told Ambassador November 29 that the holodomor bill revealed tensions inside Regions' faction. Vasyunyk spent all day November 28 at the Rada and had spoken to a number of Regions managers about the bill. Most Regions MPs had wanted to vote for the President's bill - as many as 150 of the 186-strong faction, he claimed. However, the faction had enforced party discipline, with the two exceptions noted above. The mood in Regions' caucus was very tense after the vote, claimed Vasyunyk, as many MPs, including dozens who had lost relatives in the holodomor, were angry they had been forced to abstain against their beliefs.

National Identity and Politics, historical controversy

¶ 9. (C) Interestingly enough, the holodomor has the potential to be a unifying issue across Ukraine's recent "blue-orange" geographic political division, since the majority of deaths occurred in the east and center of the country, particularly in Kharkiv province (note: much of the "orange" west was under Polish rule in the interwar era). However, the cause of the holodomor as genocide has traditionally been nurtured

more strongly in nationalist western Ukraine. Since becoming President in January 2005, Yushchenko has consistently championed the cause of fully acknowledging the impact of the holodomor as genocide as part of the ongoing formation of a stronger Ukrainian national identity. (Note: Some sociologists consider Ukraine to be a post-genocidal society as a result of the loss of such a significant percentage of its population over twelve years from 1932-44, spanning the holodomor, the great purges, and WWII.) Vasyunyk remarked to Ambassador that unifying Ukrainians was the President's -- and Moroz's - goal in sponsoring the bill.

¶10. (SBU) An early November poll showed 65 percent of Ukrainians agree that the holodomor represented genocide indicate that Yushchenko's effort to publicize the tragedy has had an impact. An earlier poll of 2000 Ukrainians conducted in September showed that 69 percent of respondents believed the famine was caused by the government's actions, with 84 percent of those believing that it was caused intentionally. Passage of the bill vindicates Yushchenko's efforts and bolsters his status as a leader.

¶11. (C) The most interesting development in the November 28 vote was the active role of Rada Speaker Moroz in ensuring passage of a text ultimately opposed by coalition leader Regions. His Socialist Party's traditional base includes rural areas like Poltava heavily affected by the holodomor, and the party's ratings have plummeted in the wake of his July decision to abandon OU and BYuT to join with Regions and the Communists instead. Moroz may well have decided that supporting the "holodomor as genocide" bill could help salvage credibility with his disaffected electorate. The same day he also dedicated a Rada plaque in memory of slain journalist Heorhiy Gongadze on the sixth anniversary of Moroz' dramatic playing of recorded conversations implicating then President Kuchma in Gongadze's disappearance (septel), a move many journalists dismissed as a PR stunt by Moroz.

¶12. (C) Regions, which has generally won most political skirmishes since last summer, clearly showed ambivalence in the days leading up to the vote, unsure how to position themselves on an issue of less importance to their overall eastern and southern base (the September poll indicated that only 33 percent of eastern and 45 percent of southern respondents thought the famine was caused by intentional governmental action) and which clearly irritates Moscow. Regions deputy leader Volodymyr Makeyenko, one of ten Regions' whips, told us November 30 that Regions initially planned to have 30 MPs vote for the final version, to show partial support, but party leaders later reversed that, ordering no support. While Makeyenko personally favored the

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measure, he feared loss of his Budget Committee Chairmanship had he bucked party discipline, predicting that Chornovil and Herman would eventually be punished for not hewing to the party line.

¶13. (SBU) Regions' decision also gave an opening to Our Ukraine's Yuri Pavlenko, whose fate as Youth Minister had been dangling for over a month as part of the ongoing Yushchenko-Yanukovych dance, to finally cut ties with the Yanukovych-led cabinet. In announcing his renewed determination to resign, Pavlenko said that he could not remain in a government with those who failed to support the genocide motion. The Rada granted his wish, firing him from his position November 29 with 241 votes in favor.

¶14. (C) Comment: Although the 1932-33 famine is considered perhaps the most heinous of the many crimes by a totalitarian Soviet regime against its own people, international historiographical disagreement continues over whether Ukrainians were specifically targeted during a famine which killed millions across the Soviet Union. According to documents from the time, Stalin issued specific orders for the confiscation in Ukrainian-populated regions of all

foodstuffs, not just grain, significantly not just in the Ukrainian SSR but also in Ukrainian populated districts in Russia's Kuban region. Russian historians in particular maintain that famine deaths in Ukraine were merely part of a wider famine sparked by Stalin to break rural resistance to collectivization. In the aftermath of the mass deaths, Soviet authorities moved quickly to resettle ethnic Russians in newly formed collective farms across the depopulated Ukrainian areas.

¶15. (U) Note: Ukrainian media reported that three activists from Russian nationalist groups the National Bolshevik Front (NBF) and the Eurasian Youth Union (EYU) marked the Rada's passage of the bill by throwing firecrackers at the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow November 29. NBF and EYU representatives told the press that the action was in protest of a bill which was offensive to the eternal friendship of the Great Russian and "Little Russian" peoples. The latter term, Malorossiya, was used in the 18th-20th centuries instead of Ukraine by Russians seeking to deny the existence of an independent Ukrainian identity.

U.S. role in promoting holodomor awareness

¶16. (SBU) Note: The U.S. Congress has played a role over the past twenty years in promoting awareness of the holodomor. A Congressional Commission on the Ukraine famine, authorized in 1985 and headed by historian James Mace, conducted groundbreaking archival and oral history research, leading to a final report conclusion in 1988 that: "Joseph Stalin and those around him committed genocide against the Ukrainians in 1932-33." Mace's research formed the basis for Robert Conquest's seminal 1986 book "Harvest of Sorrow," and Mace remains a hero today for many Ukrainians. In 1993, on the 60th anniversary of the holodomor, the Congressional Commission handed over to the newly independent Ukrainian government 4 volumes of findings, 10 volumes of archival materials, and 200 cassettes of oral history recordings of holodomor survivor testimony. In 1998, the US Congress endorsed a joint resolution commemorating the 65th anniversary of the holodomor.

¶17. (SBU) During President Yushchenko's triumphant April 2005 appearance before a Joint Session of Congress, he said in gratitude: "It was from this hall that the world came to know the truth of the holodomor, a genocide famine masterminded to annihilate millions of Ukrainians." On October 13, President Bush signed into law HR 652, a Congressional bill authorizing construction on federal land in Washington, D.C. of a memorial "to honor the victims of the famine and genocide that occurred in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933."

¶18. (U) Visit Embassy Kyiv's classified website:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/kiev.

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